

Real Christian macho men eat ribs!?

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When I was in my late teen years, there was a TV program on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, called "The Power Connection."

Clearly this show was intended to address the needs of teenage Christians who are feeling tired of being called "sissy" or "coward" by their peers in school because of being Christians. In each show the "Power Team" of 10 or so extremely muscular men broadcast from a sport arena packed with teenage audience. After a short revivalistic message by the lead macho man of the Power Team, the rest of the team demonstrates "how strong and brave real Christians" are by showing athletic stunt acts such as breaking a pile of 20 concrete slabs by ramming their heads into it, breaking a large number of baseball bats in quick succession within one minute, tearing a thick phone book into two, and handcuffed men breaking free by pulling their wrists apart.

These performances were done while upbeat praise-and-worship music playing on the background and these teens loudly cheering at the Power Team. During and between these next-to-impossible athletic feats there were lots of pep talks by the lead macho guy as if they were at a network marketing convention.

"Hallelujah! Jesus is alive! We can do all things in the name of Jesus!"

"Praise the Lord!!!! Now he's going to break these concrete slabs, 100 pounds each, 20 of them right here on this stage, with using only his forehead!!!! Hallelujah!"

"Help him everyone! Give him a 'J'! Give him an 'E'! Give him an 'S'! Give him a 'U'! Give him an 'S'! What do these letters spell! JESUS! Who is the King of Kings! JESUS! In the mighty name of Jesus! One!! Two!! Three!!!!" *Crrr-aaaaa-sh!!!!* "Hallelujah! Nothing is impossible in the Lord!!!!"

...And so it went for half an hour, over and over, week after week.

In a militaristic and violent culture such as in America, the Gospel is often marketed in a militaristic way. There are lots of war analogies by American preachers, and often being a Christian is misconstrued as being synonymous with being a masculine, patriotic and militaristic follower of the American Way of Life. Even more, the Christian mass media outlets such as TBN and CBN portray this kind of Christianity as the only existing Christian lifestyle except perhaps for some isolated "dangerous and heretic cults."

So it is often difficult to imagine Christians who are strict vegans, who observe Jewish holidays and refuse to participate in Christmas or Easter, who do not play musical instruments, or who do not use electricity. And it is even harder to imagine that most of them are theologically very conservative and



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Genesis 50:15-21
Psalms 103:1-13
Romans 14:1-12
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literalistic. Seventh-Day Adventists, Church of God International Association, and Amish are all far from liberal or progressive, theologically or otherwise.

When I became a Christian when I was still in middle school, I would try out different denominations and churches – often times I found many variations of the same denomination. In the Baptist ‘family’ there were Southern Baptists, Seventh-Day Baptists, American Baptists, Bible Baptists, Conservative Baptists, Landmark Baptists, Missionary Baptists, and even more. In the Reform and Calvinist traditions there were Presbyterian Church of many flavours, Christian Reformed Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and so forth. Even the Catholics are not a monolith: there are literally hundreds of Catholic denominations, although many of which are in communion with Rome.

There are tens of thousands of Christian denominations on the earth today. Many of them triumphantly claim the legacy of “standing up for the truth” and “fighting apostasy” as they split off from their former denominational ties. Some denominations claim that they are the closest possible church one can get to that of the First Century original Christianity. A few even have an audacity to claim that they are the only true church on this planet.

So when I was younger, I was wondering which denomination would get me to heaven, or at least keep me out of hell. When I began questioning the beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and later decided to join the fundamental Baptists, the deepest part of me did not really have a total confidence that the latter was more “right” than the former. Frankly I did not really know because they all used the same Bible, yet taught different and contradictory things, stabbed each other’s back and called each other damned. I was interested in God. I was intrigued on the intellectual level by the many subtle and obvious differences between each school of theological thought, but I did not have enough confidence in entrusting my soul’s eternity to one single denomination, that claims somebody rediscovered the truth of Christ after centuries of Catholic or Protestant apostasy.

So my pre-teen logic went like this:

1. If I were a Jehovah’s Witness and then the end of the world comes, the real God would show up and He (yes, JW’s said ‘He’) would either resurrect me into eternity if JW’s were right, or if Baptists were right He (yes, Baptists said ‘He’ also) would damn me to the eternal hellfire.

2. If I became a Baptist and then the end of the world comes, the real God would show up and He would either reward me for being a born-again, saved Baptist, or if the Jehovah’s Witnesses were right, He would delete me out of existence and I won’t exist at all. There’s no hell according to the Witnesses.

So I calculated the risk between these two options, and became a Baptist.

As humorous as this may sound, I was dead serious at that time.

From the way how each and every denomination I came in contact with claimed theirs is the most authentic and most correct form of Christianity, and how others are cursed by God for supposed apostasy, hypocrisy and false teaching, I was afraid of betting my own soul on any church, even as I desired to be on the “right side” of faith.

So how can we know that the expression of Christian faith we have is



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'right'?

This is the question that is being addressed in today's Pauline Epistle.

"Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God." – Romans 14:1-6.

Now it is important to note that the writer of this letter is not saying that those who are vegetarians or those who observe any particular holy day – whether Jewish or gentile ones, have less faith in Christ than those who do not. Rather, "those who are weak in faith" are confused because some believers say such observances of dietary laws and holy days are necessary to earn the approval of God, and some other believers say the complete opposite by saying those who do are not Christians. When this letter was written some early Christians saw Jewish observances of kosher laws and Hebrew holy days as an affront to the Gospel, while others who saw the Gospel as a natural extension of Judaism claimed such observances are the product of the Messiah's redemption and thus required of all believers.

For those who are new to the Gospel, especially for those from other cultures, feel confused over all this in-fighting.

As recently as in not-so-distant past of the mid-twentieth century, some foreign missionaries to the third world sincerely thought that becoming a Christian is very much like becoming an American or a Briton. So the missionaries forced newly converted Christians to eat Western food, dressed in Western clothing and Western haircut, leaving behind any trace of the 'pagan' cultural upbringing. Even today, there are some Christians who think there is only one 'Christian culture' –which usually looks like American culture—and one Christian way of being, particularly if the converted is from a culture or sub-cultural group they see as 'evil.'

The answer given in today's lectionary passage in Romans is simple: *it is our intentions that count, not the superficial appearances.* God is more interested in what is truly within us—our sincerity, motives, mindset and our spirit. God can see through all the trappings and façade of the religious observances, doctrines and confessions if our hearts are not in there, even if they are all 'authentic.' On the other hand, the Scriptures repeatedly demonstrate that any person who has faith and love is accepted and blessed in God's eyes.

Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem, blessed Abraham, the first follower of the Hebrew monotheism. Who was Melchizedek, who is called the 'Priest of the Most High'? Certainly he was not a Hebrew, and may not even be a monotheist like Abraham. The 'Most High' Melchizedek worshipped was not called by him 'Yahweh' – or for that matter neither did Abraham.



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Abraham did not have a Torah scroll or a Bible preacher, so his theological and cosmological views would have been straight from 'pagan' Mesopotamia, even with his personal encounter with God whom his offspring would later call 'God of Abraham.'

Nevertheless, God considered Abraham righteous because of his faith.

The message Paul wanted to communicate to the Romans, Colossians and Galatians was that non-Jews who had no prior experience or education in Judaism do not have to convert to Judaism as adults and learn all the details of Jewish observances to earn God's blessings. Rather, he meant that the Gospel of Christ does not favour or elevate one culture or religion over others, and the Church can be united in Christ but nevertheless multicultural, diverse and pluralistic. What Christ accomplished and what the Holy Spirit was doing were sufficient in grace, and all what is required was to live that New Covenant by living in love.

"Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God." (v. 6.)

Do real, macho Christians eat ribs? You bet, for sure. And so do they eat tempeh, tofu and even seitan. We don't worship American or any other culture in place of Christ. And it is always fun to have varieties. So throw in falafel, tabouleh, hoedra, pad thai, samosa, kimchee, tempura, kugel and haggis. Now we're all hungry and we've got some decent church potluck.

Eat 'em and give thanks to God.

Oh, we make all-vegan food with organic, non-GMO ingredients whenever we can afford them.

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